

THE DAILY RECORD

Biotech & Tech

House may restore some stem cell research cuts

ANDY ROSEN

Daily Record Business Writer

March 10, 2008

ANNAPOLIS — It looks like the Maryland Stem Cell Research Fund will be cut this year as lawmakers look to free up cash in an increasingly tight budget, but the fund may get better treatment in the House of Delegates than it has so far in the Senate.

Del. John L. Bohanan Jr., D-St. Mary's, who heads the House Appropriations Health and Education Subcommittee, said Friday that he does not envision a severe decrease in the fund for fiscal 2009, which begins in July.

"I think the House is inclined to [make] some reductions to the stem cells, but not nearly as deep as the Senate," he said.

The Senate Budget and Taxation Committee recommended cutting new money for the stem cell fund to \$5 million from the \$23 million proposed by Gov. Martin O'Malley. Bohanan said he expected the House proposal to come in around the "midteens."

Bohanan's subcommittee will review the budget next week for the Maryland Technology Development Corp., or TEDCO, which oversees the funds.

Stem cell advocates, including TEDCO, have maintained that they could live with around \$15 million per year, but said a reduction to \$5 million would hurt Maryland's research climate. The fund got \$15 million in fiscal 2007, its first year of existence, and \$23 million in fiscal 2008.

Sen. Edward J. Kasemeyer, D-Baltimore and Howard counties, said the fund has been slow to spend money it has already gotten. Still, Kasemeyer, who heads the Senate Budget and Taxation Subcommittee on Health, Education and Human Resources — the first subcommittee to review the TEDCO budget — said he is somewhat flexible on stem cell spending.

Legislative analysts recommended that the General Assembly eliminate this year's allowance for stem cells.

Dr. W. Jonathan Lederer, a stem cell researcher at the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute, said he thinks there is a big difference between \$5 million and the "midteens."

"It sends a much stronger message to the research and business communities about Maryland's support of this important area of research," he said. Another advantage of increased stem cell spending would be an increase in the projects supported in Maryland, he added.

Lederer, director of UMBI's Medical Biotechnology Center, won a three-year, \$1.5 million stem cell grant last year. He said it is not fair to say the fund has been too slow to spend its money because many of the grants are paid out over several years.

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